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'COMBAT PROVEN' V CORPS SIGNAL SOLDIERS SAY THEY'RE READY FOR SECOND IRAQ DEPLOYMENT

By Pfc. Michael Howard

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DARMSTADT, Germany — "Daddy, you need to get out of that suit," said Kirsten Watson to her father, Spc. Richard Watson, a tropospheric scatterplot operator with V Corps' 578th Signal Company, 440th Signal Battalion. "I can't even recognize you in it."

"That's the idea, honey." replied Watson, torn between laughter and tears.

With bags in their hand, children in their arms, and tears in their eyes, Watson and his fellow members of the 578th and the 17th Signal Battalion – both part of the corps' 22nd Signal Brigade -- said goodbye to friends and family January 14 as they prepared to head to Iraq a second time. Their second deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in two years, veterans and first-timers alike deployed in multiple waves over the past two weeks.

"I'll miss my kids tremendously," said Staff Sgt. John Hassel, an automations NCO with Headquarters Company, 17th Signal Battalion. "I have two small ones and a brand-new baby. However, this is still my mission, and it's what I signed up to do."

Though he doesn't see his coming deployment as paradise, Hassel says he faces it much better prepared and trained than any previous deployment. "We had a lot more time to plan and prepare for this [deployment]," he said. "We also had a lot more training. We went through convoy training; live-fire exercises; night vision goggle training, and a full battalion team certification."

"I know that 578th will go downrange and accomplish the mission and then some. They've trained vigorously in these past three months, and they will represent this unit well.

I've only known [1st Sgt. Michael Williams, the 578th first sergeant] a short time, but I already know that he will bring his soldiers downrange in one piece and bring them back safely," said 1st Sgt. Richard D. Barrett of Bravo Company, 440th Signal Battalion.

578th Signal Company commander Cpt. Jeffrey M. Prevett expressed confidence in his Soldiers and those on the home front. "We've done it once, we've done it twice, and they're going to do it again," Prevett said. "I've seen them on convoys, I've seen them do live-fire, and yes, they can communicate. But communication comes second. What comes first is taking care of the Soldiers and taking care of the families."

As they watch their brigade return to hostile territory, 22nd Signal Brigade Commander Col. Fredrick A. Cross and brigade Command Sergeant Major Thomas J. Clark have made it a mission to see off each soldier personally. They haven't missed a soldier yet. Every time a wave of 22nd Signal Soldiers boards a plane to Iraq, Cross and Clark are waiting at the airplane doors.

"We're driven by an intense desire to be with these Soldiers," said Clark, "There's a lot of pride in watching these combat-proven veterans with smiles on their faces realizing that they're departing for a year; to see the confidence in their eyes, and their confidence in one another. I can tell you it's very difficult to drive the other way in the van and see them fly off into combat. It's one of the most difficult things.

But I know that they're fully trained and ready."

